

Colombia Updating the Mission?

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With the emergence of the so-called new threats, the world's perspective on the use of force has changed, and new challenges have developed. Alternative roles for the military have been proposed, and even new philosophies have been developed with concepts such as population-centric warfare and network-centric warfare. All of these revolve around the idea of developing better relations with the people and seeking a better understanding of the environment.

However, in Latin America in general and in Colombia in particular, these issues have been part of daily life for many years, and the role of the military has long had a much broader scope than the more narrow conceptions articulated in Western civil-military relations theory. The reality is that the more expansive role has been part of the lives of the Latin countries due to their different historical circumstances.

Contrary to what might be happening in other countries, the internal struggle has been the most important issue in Colombia during the last few decades, and consequently the military has been involved in irregular war in all its facets. These have included the participation of the Colombian armed forces as main actors in our counterinsurgency and nation-building strategies, as well as first responders to major natural emergencies and disasters.

Irrespective of the present declining strength of insurgency in Colombia and the regaining of governmental authority in all the national territory, it is unlikely that in the short- or medium-term a change of role will emerge for the Colombian armed forces. More likely is that they will continue to be engaged for years to come in the effort directed against internal violence and in emergency efforts.

The Latin American Environment

Though no major international wars have affected Latin America for a long period of time,¹ the region is far from being a tranquil neighborhood. It has been plagued with internal violence, caused sometimes by political issues, sometimes by organized crime as a consequence of the drug trafficking

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Colombian army special forces at Tolemaida
Air Base during technical demonstration

issue, and sometimes by social contradictions as in the case of the gangs affecting much of Central America and Mexico. The levels of violence these nongovernmental actors produce are extremely high, becoming in many cases the main concern of governments and international organizations such as the Organization of American States and the United Nations. These latter often demand more and better action against the threat to public order.

The armed forces in the majority of the Latin countries have been central actors in national life, and in some countries still maintain substantial societal power. During the Cold War era, for example, military officers became dictators and de facto rulers. The “Southern Cone” was under



military rule for many years as were neighboring countries. The armed forces became important players in national development and executed important infrastructure projects that impact to the present. Still, with time and the end of the Cold War, such arrangements became dated and were replaced by democracies willing to strengthen civilian control and development of civil society. In the Southern Cone, the previous situation was reversed, and the armed forces were banned from internal action except in extreme cases, such as natural disasters.

In Central America, following the insurgencies that affected the region for more than 15 years in the 1970s and 1980s, ending with the defeat of the insurgents, something similar happened. The

military was not only reduced in its effectiveness (and effectiveness) but also banned from intervening in internal affairs. This did not remain the case for long because the growing levels of crime changed the minds of the politicians. The result was that again in countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador, the armed forces were recalled to internal duties, but this time to assist the police in the struggle against violence and to chase armed bands and gangs. Still, they had lost much capacity.

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Mexico, a traditional paradise for tourists, suddenly became a battleground where the number of casualties mounted day after day due to the actions of drug cartels trying to smuggle cocaine, as well as marijuana and heroin (which were produced within Mexico's borders), into the United States, and to prevail over rivals in competing gangs. Ultimately, the Mexican armed forces, especially the navy through its marines, were directed to join the fight and quickly became main actors and an important element in the overall strategy of the government to deter and stop the drug cartels.

Much farther south in Chile in 2010, after the terrible earthquake that shook that country, the armed forces, which had been confined to their barracks for more than 15 years, were recalled. They not only assisted the victims but also controlled the security situation and brought back order to the affected zones.

As these examples illustrate, the role of the armed forces in Latin America has been a staple

of the internal environment and continues to be so today. This is unlikely to change as various missions are assigned from the general category sometimes simply termed "new roles." In reality, these roles are much as they have long been.

Where there is an important difference is in the revived sphere of politics in the nations of Latin America, where, for a time, the military held sway. As a consequence, political control over military activities has tightened. Today, the armed forces are under the close supervision of the political authorities. In some countries, the difference between defense and security is strictly understood to mean "no participation" of the armed forces in internal affairs. This results in primacy only in traditional military affairs with small windows of opportunity opened for internal participation in cases of emergency. The result is an often artificial preparation for defense through regular war that is unlikely to occur.

The Colombian Environment

Ironically, Colombia is perhaps the premier example of a state where the military must be prepared for both external defense and internal involvement through counterinsurgency and counterterrorism.

For many years, the main characteristic of the Colombian environment was weakness of the state. Historically, in fact, Colombia has been a weak state unable to control its own territory and to provide good services to its citizens. As a consequence, all manner of criminality flourished, especially in the areas without government presence.

Perhaps even more debilitating, the idea of using violence for the achievement of political gains became embedded over many years in the minds of local and national politicians of both major political persuasions, liberal and

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conservative, beginning with several civil wars during the 19th century. Those wars ravaged the countryside, destroying the national infrastructure that had been built after independence and killing tens if not hundreds of thousands of Colombians at times. Particularly costly was the so-called Thousand Days War of 1899–1902. The consequences were devastating and brutal.

Yet clashes between liberals and conservatives did not stop there. In the 20th century, liberals and conservatives looked upon each other as enemies and invariably excluded the other whenever a change of power occurred. Instead of ameliorating rivalry, the passage of time saw its consolidation. The peak came in 1948, when the Liberal Party's brightest star was assassinated in Bogota. The reaction blamed the conservatives. The result was Colombia's costliest civil war, termed simply *The Violence*, or *La Violencia*. Bogota was nearly destroyed, and the bloodshed spilled into the countryside where it reached its greatest intensity. The machete, the traditional working tool of the peasants, or *campesinos*, became a deadly weapon. Soon, casualties mounted to unimaginable numbers, at least several hundred thousand. The situation was out of control.

Within such a catastrophic context, the armed forces, particularly the army, were summoned to take action. Their mission was to neutralize the armed gangs and restore peace. This was difficult because many of the groups were embedded within the population. In other cases, their support came from political party elements. Nevertheless, military success slowly brought about a change in the situation, with order all but restored as the 1960s began. At this point, though, new threats emerged from the more thinly populated areas of the country.

In the mid-1960s, new armed groups appeared in Colombia. This time, they

were inspired by the Cuban Revolution and Colombian Communist Party. These groups began a different type of politically oriented violence that aimed not just to fight the government, as had their predecessors, but to seize political power and change the nature of the state to a Marxist regime. This was to be accomplished through a prolonged process of People's War that followed a strategic plan. That strategic plan was designed in phases to unfold according to a schedule that combined the time and space gained through popular mobilization with increasing territorial control.

Amid this challenge emerged another, that of drug trafficking, first in the form of marijuana, later heroin, and eventually cocaine. The lethal combination threatened the security of all citizens. Again, the military was called to restore the situation. In fact, throughout the events outlined, some units had participated in internal control even as others were deployed to different areas of the country to assist the authorities in the consolidation process. In some cases, these units used their own resources to improve the situation of the inhabitants with whom they became involved. Still, as violence increased, so did the military's role and its commitment to its assigned mission.

Army Mission During *La Violencia* (1948–1962)

Of course, it is the army that we are particularly discussing since it has always been the dominant service. When violence broke out in Colombia in 1948, the structure of the army was conventional and deployed in independent brigades. Each brigade was an independent force comprised of three infantry battalions (equipped mainly with small arms) supported by an artillery battalion, a cavalry group, and an engineer battalion. This structure had been developed by

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a Swiss advisory mission some years before. In the 1930s, this organization had faced a limited war (1932–1943) against the Peruvian army in the jungles of the Amazon due to territorial claims by that country.² After a difficult period of offensive actions in a difficult environment, the army was able to achieve its military objectives. The conflict ended with a national strategic victory that featured few casualties and lessons learned.

Yet the army's structure was not suitable for dealing with irregular groups. It proved too heavy and inflexible. Hence, reforms were made. In particular, the centralized command and control structure was modified, with companies given the latitude for independent action needed to counter elusive irregular groups.

Clearly, even at this moment, the mission of the army, as it was understood during the conflict with Peru, was evolving to one that focused primarily upon stability operations rather than preparing to defend the borders. In a sense, the Colombian military was undergoing the transformation that would be required of (in particular) the U.S. Army as a consequence of its post-9/11 involvement in counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan. Jaime García Covarrubias explains that such a shift occurs “since the design of the military apparatus depends on the selected strategic modality and that, in turn, depends on the challenges and threats facing the State.”³ So it could be said that the strategic modality of the Colombian government evolved as internal stability assumed primacy. In such a case, the state will utilize all of its available tools to gain control of its internal situation. This widens the scope of the missions that the army in particular and the armed forces in general must carry out.

The main focus of these missions is action in support of the police forces but not replacing

them. In the case at hand, the Colombian army had to adapt its tactics and equipment to this new mission, which included discarding artillery and armor⁴ and increasing the use of trucks and light vehicles, as well as helicopters and boats (this last item to control the rivers of the Amazon jungle basin). Such a posture was possible because the Colombian constitution allowed the armed forces to protect the “institutions” of the country. Military action hence became authorized when “democratic institutions” of the country were in jeopardy.

Simultaneously, the government was willing to develop new national infrastructure, especially roads and bridges, and at least partially turned to the army for completion of the effort. In this way, the army was committed almost fully to internal missions, and its obligation to prepare to defend the country's sovereignty was reduced to a minimum. At the same time, the army began to interact with the Colombian National Police (CNP) by assisting in certain procedures when they had to be conducted in rural areas, such as protecting small police stations and patrols in dangerous areas. Military outposts were deployed to those places where the security situation had deteriorated to try to protect villages and municipalities from the armed gangs who roamed the countryside.

Ironically, even as the military became accustomed to such a role, the army was again tasked at least in part with a traditional mission: support for the United Nations in the Korean War. In 1950, Bogota sent an infantry battalion to Korea, along with a navy frigate. Though involvement was intense,⁵ this was only the second time in the 20th century that the army had participated in a traditional mission using regular doctrine and means. After little more than 3 years, the troops returned home bringing with them a variety of experiences and knowledge

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about traditional wars. Within a short period, though, they returned to their previous nontraditional role in irregular, internal conflict.

Strategic Adaptation to Changing Context

At the end of the 1970s, the internal situation in Colombia became more complicated still. Coca cultivation, which had previously been centered in Peru and Bolivia, responded to the pressure of counternarcotics efforts in those two countries by transplanting itself to Colombia. It set down roots primarily in just those spaces that were characterized by a lack of state presence. The consequence was the empowerment of those who previously had been relatively minor criminals. Growth of coca was accompanied by the production of the drug itself and its movement into the channels that supplied it to the American and eventually European markets. Typical of the resulting narcotrafficking cartel was that of Medellin under Pablo Escobar, who used all manner of brutality and criminal activity to secure his market-share. Such was the level of violence that the military had to be engaged by the state. Ultimately, successful action by the military and police destroyed the large, powerful cartels.

Unfortunately, this action occurred even as the leading insurgent group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), developed a strategic plan funded primarily by money coming from involvement in the drug trade (initially, protection; later, direct involvement). Hence, the state was distracted at the time FARC garnered greatly enhanced funding generated by narcotics

but supplemented by efforts in a variety of other criminal enterprises, notably kidnapping and extortion. The result was that in a relatively short period of time after the formal 1982 leap into the drug matrix, FARC had acquired enough strength to challenge the army with “columns” (*columnas*) capable of overrunning exposed or isolated reinforced companies. This “war of movement,” in the doctrinal terms of People’s War, which was adopted as the warfighting approach by FARC, led in the late 1990s and early 2000s to half a dozen large, intense actions atop the much more numerous terror and guerrilla activities. The toll inflicted on the army and police was high (exceptionally high in the case of the latter).

The result was what some called “civil war” due to its intensity but what in reality was simply “war.” That is, the insurgents did not have the support of anything even remotely close to the half the population that is the critical metric in labeling a conflict civil war. Indeed, the two key tasks of the

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security forces were, first, protecting citizens, and second, eliminating the structures and funding of FARC (and, to a lesser extent, of a distant second group, the National Liberation Army, or ELN). In terms of mission, then, it can be seen that the shift to preservation of order and ensuring security for the country’s citizens had completely overtaken any realistic preparation for interstate war as dictated by the traditional need to defend the national territory from foreign aggression.

The participation of the Colombian armed forces to internal security missions was a political decision driven by the necessity to lower the insecurity index. Insecurity in the urban areas was created primarily by drug trafficking gangs, in the rural areas by FARC (and, to a lesser extent, by ELN). Though the National Police assumed primacy in the struggle against the drug cartels and the armed forces in the fight against FARC, the armed forces frequently were deployed in urban areas to execute area domination operations and to secure specific sectors of different cities.

As previously mentioned, the Colombian constitution, since it was first promulgated in 1886 and amended in 2001, authorizes the use of the armed forces in this type of mission: “The Armed Forces will have as their primary purpose the defense of the sovereignty, independence, and integrity of the national territory and of the constitutional order.”⁶ The twin challenges of the narcotraffickers and the would-be insurgents (mainly FARC) again were such that commitment of the armed forces was necessary. More than force was involved. Assets such as engineers engaged in local development, with financing done in most cases by local authorities. Whatever the precise nature of the assets deployed, most of the Colombian forces were involved in internal missions. Only small contingents were dispatched to the country’s international borders. A single understrength battalion was deployed in the Sinai as part of the United Nations peacekeeping mission there. The internal orientation was solidified by tasking that included response to natural disasters, such as the terrible Armero incident.⁷

Listing the missions carried out by the Colombian armed forces between 1948 and 2002, therefore, produces:

- ❖ internal security
- ❖ nation-building
- ❖ international wars
- ❖ disaster relief.

This variety of missions gives an idea how the armed forces and especially the army adapted to all types of situations, often on short notice. Ultimately, they served as an instrument of national power that was used frequently and for long periods for purposes beyond those deemed traditional.

Democratic Security Policy

In spite of the intense participation of the armed forces in internal security missions, the situation in the 1990s went from bad to worse. In response to the disintegration of public order they saw engulfing them, Colombians in 2002 elected as president the only candidate who offered to turn the tide, Alvaro Uribe. Once in office, Uribe promulgated his “Democratic Security Policy,” which aimed to end violence in Colombia and neutralize the main threats to the population—FARC and the drug traffickers.

As had been the case in the past, the main tools to achieve the proposed goals were the armed forces, especially the army. Uribe’s first intention was to strengthen the forces’ ability to deal with the internal threats, so he asked for a special tax to finance security programs. It passed easily. The foundation of democratic security was securing the countryside, especially small and remote villages traditionally at the mercy of the drug traffickers and FARC. To do this, he developed a particular form of neighborhood watch system by giving a slice of the national draft levy the option of serving in “home guard” units trained as regular soldiers.

These units gave local authorities their own defensive capability.

Uribe also agreed with the plans of the armed forces to attack FARC’s “strategic rear-guard” located in the former demilitarized zone granted by former President Andrés Pastrana Arango. This was done using counterguerrilla units with support from the navy and the air force. Designed to disrupt the operational coherence and logistics bases of FARC, the operation had no time limit,⁸ and the military units deployed remained indefinitely through use of block leave and other techniques. Simultaneously, in the remainder of the country, local operations continued.

A dedicated special operations effort targeted FARC leadership to try to decapitate the organization. Special forces were organized,

development was undertaken, especially construction of infrastructure that would incorporate areas into larger economic, social, and political networks

trained, and equipped to augment existing capabilities. Relatively quickly, they scored spectacular and public successes, but these were accompanied by much more mundane but regular, important neutralization of midlevel targets.

While this was happening, the CNP was dealing with the drug traffickers and their self-defense groups in the urban and rural areas. This was challenging, since numerous small cartels had emerged after the elimination of the Medellin and the Cali cartels. To accomplish this type of mission, CNP was equipped with some military arms such as machineguns and small mortars, as well as grenade launchers, and had the support of helicopters.⁹

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As areas were reclaimed, it was necessary to hold and develop them. For this purpose, special interagency programs were directed to improving the living conditions of inhabitants at two levels. At the first level, traditional civil-military action addressed immediate necessities and laid the foundation for a handoff to democratic authority. At the second level, development was undertaken, especially construction of infrastructure that would incorporate areas into larger economic, social, and political networks. Everything from bridge construction to school development was included. Because many remote areas were located in insecure areas, resources came from a variety of governmental levels with security always an integral component of the whole.

Such a melding of the instruments of national power produced a visible improvement in both development and security. Standard livelihood metrics such as *road counts* (that is, traffic) and *business* were augmented by efforts to judge security (for example, whether a mayor slept in his town) and military initiative (for example, who was launching attacks and on what type of targets). At the heart of the Uribe strategy was fostering security of the individual within the national context. There followed the predictable (and hoped for) blossoming of national life. Gross domestic product growth, which at one point had fallen to less than 1 percent, together with fears for the economic situation in general, improved markedly and went even to 7 percent in some years. The poverty rate came down by more than 10 points, though it remained high by most measures.

In this way, President Uribe emphasized anew the premier role of internal security in the mission profile of the armed forces. Indeed, it could be argued that the tremendous success

enjoyed by Uribe during his two terms as president was due precisely to the participation of the armed forces as the main component in restoring security to the polity. To do this, though, many traditional facets of the military institution required reform and enhancement. Improved mobility and combat staying power were among the greatest improvements, with significant advances made not only in use of rotary wing assets but also in military medicine and treatment of casualties.

Even something seemingly as simple as enhancing mobility required extensive enhancement of Colombia's support infrastructure; training of pilots, technicians, and maintenance personnel; and acquisition of techniques such as night flying and movement of weapons in combat. With American support, a new aviation brigade was organized and soon was fully operational and ready to support the armed forces. Least of our concerns was acquiring new helicopters. More importantly, a new and modern culture was developed around the aviation brigade. This allowed the achievement of much that had been difficult or even impossible.

Hence, the military was able to offer protection to the people in ways that went beyond anything seen previously. For example, fishermen were able to return to the rivers and streams and even to fish during the night, something that was prohibited by FARC. Vendors along the roads could return to business, offering their products, normally fruits and other agricultural elements to returning tourists. Travel became an ordinary past-time again, whether on roads or rivers. Special capabilities ensured these ordinary functions. Using the Colombian marines and a great number of small *piranha* boats, the rivers could be kept safe. Likewise, a national plan, *Meteor*, with its

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own assets, secured the road network and ended FARC use of roadblocks as the sites for kidnapping and other crimes.

Capabilities, then, improved dramatically, but in all this effort, little was dedicated to the improvement of the more conventional equipment or techniques that might be required by regular military engagement. Certain types of aircraft, ships, submarines, and even armor and heavy artillery were not sought, sending with this a clear message that the mission of the Colombian armed forces would continue to be internally oriented.

New Environment in Colombia

The Democratic Security Policy changed life in Colombia in dramatic ways. Though serious security problems remained, in general the country returned from the brink of failing. The threat to the very existence of the state had been pushed to the margins of society, physically and certainly mentally, and the ability of even criminal actors to impact significantly upon national rhythms had been contained.

FARC, as the principal security challenge to the state, found its armed structure checked, and the number of militants and armed guerrillas diminished substantially.¹⁰ Control of human and physical terrain long held was lost, and the resident guerrilla units in populated areas were forced into the deep jungle to avoid the superior fire-power of the armed forces. More telling, FARC lost those links to the populace that had served as its original foundation and the basis for its Marxist ideology of liberation. The insurgents, already in a tenuous relationship with the masses due to the former's reliance upon drugs and criminality for resource generation—as opposed to drawing what was needed from the people—found themselves completely isolated. This led to a lashing out against the people, who became not the sea that

fish swam in, but perceived threats. Consequently, the population in general was targeted, completing the transition of the movement from FARC's status as insurgents in the mid-1960s to that of terrorists by the mid-2000s.

This transformation occasioned a new military situation. No more battles against government forces were fought, and the number of firefights dropped significantly. It was evident that the FARC had lost its military capacity. Instead, explosives against different targets were placed in cities and even in the countryside in places such as rural elementary schools, roads, bridges, and trails. The use of mines and improvised explosive devices became commonplace, despite their being internationally banned. It was easy to see that a transformation had taken place not only in FARC fundamentals but also in the nature of its violence and the purpose it served.

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Without doubt, President Uribe's government achieved a big success in driving FARC into its transformation as a terrorist organization with limited power and little future. Yet there remains a threat to local security in certain regions and in particular to the security of citizens where FARC remains determined to launch terrorist attacks, using mainly explosives, and to engage in kidnapping.

Similarly, drug traffickers in many cases have merged with criminal gangs spawned by splinters produced when the larger phenomenon

known as the paramilitaries demobilized in a process accomplished with international involvement.¹¹ The not totally unexpected refusal of some of those demobilized to retreat to their previous life circumstances saw the paramilitaries move laterally into organized crime. In particular, some of the paramilitary second-level leaders quickly became heads of lethal new

by spreading fear in targeted communities, FARC seeks to camouflage its strategic failure, creating at the local level the image that it is yet powerful

groups. One of the main characteristics of this type of organization was close ties to the drug trafficking cartels. Growing involvement in all facets of the drug production and early trafficking cycle led to their receiving the simple name “criminal bands” or, in Spanish, *bandas criminales*, which became BACRIM in everyday usage.¹² Eventually, they became effectively the armed wing of the cartels. Though having much in common with the first generation of paramilitaries, this new generation of BACRIM is more aggressive and more experienced than the previous one and more thoroughly integrated into the narcotics industry. In this they have much in common with the Mexican groups that have dealt such a blow to their country.

As a consequence, despite all that the government has achieved in the security field, the threats of cartels and BACRIM continue to disrupt normal life for many inhabitants of rural areas and even those of some small cities. In this sense, traditional threats to Colombian security have evolved into more sophisticated ones even as certain elements have remained constant. Drug trafficking activity and its immense profits remain central to the challenge. Still, much has changed.

In the first place, FARC has deteriorated from an insurgent organization to a terrorist one. Its main concern has become its own survival. The only way to achieve this is by avoiding direct confrontation with the armed forces. Pursuing such a course of action though creates secondary consequences. If there is no military activity, much is lost, such as internal cohesion, the organization’s credibility in the eyes of its followers, the control over its own nets, and even its relationship with other organizations (such as the narcotraffickers). With this loss goes the possibility of continuing the struggle against the government. The only possible solution is the smart use of force through small actions directed against weak targets, thus to achieve subjectively the appearance of strength even while objectively weak.

Terrorism is an ideal choice in this case. In fact, the abduction of both government officials and civilians is one of FARC’s favored actions. Numerous past victims, representing the armed forces, government, and civil society, remain hostages, some held as long as a decade. The attempt to use important hostages to effect strategic change in the correlation of forces has been revealed through interrogations of prisoners and exploitation of captured FARC documents. Though this gambit has thus far failed, FARC leadership recently issued new orders instructing columns to again seize as many hostages as possible, especially military and even retirees. The plan is to use them as bargaining tools with the government to force it to accept political terms and impositions.

Use of explosives has also become, in a variety of ways, a central part of FARC activity. By spreading fear in targeted communities, FARC seeks to camouflage its strategic failure, creating at the local level the image that it is yet powerful. Though this cannot lead to

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strategic advance, it does keep FARC on the stage, ever hopeful to capitalize upon an unseen change of global or regional circumstances that might generate national opportunity.

The criminal bands are using even more drastic methods against the inhabitants of the regions where they are active. Their first goal remains maintaining the drug production process. The protection of coca leaf cultivation is fundamental, and to do this, the BACRIM must control local populations in the affected areas. A second goal is the protection of the primary and advanced laboratories necessary to process the raw material. Both of these lead to the third goal: achieving supremacy in the permanent struggle against possible rivals and competitors. Especially in the southern part of the country close to the border with Ecuador, BACRIM compete not only for control of the coca producing process but also the routes and contacts in other countries.

The best way to gain this control is through extreme measures, assassinations, and expulsions of potentially dangerous populations (for instance, commercial farmers, peasants, and uncooperative residents in general) from areas. In limited areas, BACRIM have domination. This has not been in the manner of insurgents, through total control and exclusion of the government, but through coercion or bribery even as the state remains. A return of such negative realities to areas that during the Uribe administration had begun to experience normal life has led to a loss of state legitimacy among some groups.

In summary, then, it can be judged that the security situation in Colombia is under control. It is quite unlike that which prevailed a decade ago. FARC, in particular, has seen its dreams of seizing power destroyed. The drug traffickers continue in business, but cultivated area and

production capacity have been reduced, as have the number of metric tons shipped to overseas markets. Still, the discussion above should make clear that the armed forces continue to be central to the progress made by the state—a situation that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. This negates Western-centric concepts of “defense reform” that seek an artificial division between roles and missions.

The Way Forward

Local security in Colombia will continue to be an issue for many years. The fundamental concern will be the intensity and quality of that local security.

Intensity denotes the scope, frequency, and type of the issue. Thus far, the scope of the local security has been broad. For this purpose, the army has approximately 25,000 troops distributed in 598 municipalities.¹³ These troops create a protective shield for the police officers in each of the municipalities. Normally, each police station has an average of 20 to 30 officers. In their daily routine, they are distributed in four shifts, which translates into easily less than a dozen on duty at any given moment. The local platoon of 40 men remains on call 24 hours a day within reach of reinforcement by its parent battalion or nearby units. The army does not involve itself in police matters and has no authority to do so. The police implement local law and order. The role of the security platoon is external security of the urban area including patrolling the surroundings and running maneuvers such as ambushes and similar operations. In this way, irregular groups are deterred from approaching the urban areas or interfering with life. The resulting improvement in local security has been dramatic.

Frequency has also been intense. On a permanent basis, platoons have been deployed

in all these villages every day throughout the 9 years that have passed since the Democratic Security Policy was implemented. Small towns and villages have become accustomed to the presence of the soldiers in their villages and believe that the troops “belong” to them. They are part of their daily lives. Besides that, they have become a part of the local economy.

in some of the regions of northern Colombia in the Caribbean region the majority of the security platoons and military units have been withdrawn, with the police assuming full responsibility

The type of security has been “coordinated.” Though army troops do not interfere with police duties, their presence is a factor in reinforcing the sense of security and tranquility. Both forces thus work in coordinated fashion to achieve the same end, even as they maintain their distinct roles and chains of command.

Quality describes the results that, as indicated, have been gratifying, even as *not all* security problems have been solved. Challenges must not obscure the dramatic drop in crime and violence during the past decade. The solutions applied to the problem have been qualitatively superior and have met their objectives.

With this discussion in mind, several questions arise. Is there the possibility in the near future these successful programs that have done so much for local security could be halted? Might the roles of the armed forces, in particular that of the army, be modified substantially? Could a shift of focus release the troops from their internal security roles?

According with the current situation in Colombia, all three questions appear to produce negative responses. To respond otherwise would be to divorce the armed forces and their employment from contextual reality. The security of remote towns and regions would be jeopardized and a relapse to an era of insecurity could occur. What is more likely, then, is modifications in intensity through changes in the scope and frequency as required by local circumstances but adherence strategically to realistic address of Colombia’s situation.

This is already what is happening in some of the regions of northern Colombia in the Caribbean region. There, the quality of security obtained by coordinated action has been high and tranquility has returned. As a consequence, the majority of the security platoons and military units have been withdrawn in a systematic manner, with the police assuming full responsibility for the areas without support from the armed forces. This has not yet proved possible in other regions of the country, especially in the southern part, where the actions of FARC remnants and BACRIM remain a focus of effort by the security forces. In those places, the situation is far from normal, and the coordinated action of both services is a real priority.

In other areas, attention to the situation dictates that frequency be altered. There are areas, for instance, where the armed forces are present on only a temporary basis. This has facilitated a denser concentration of troops in those places with yet some type of problem and permitted the police to normalize daily life in the cleared areas.

This is where matters stand. During the last four decades, Colombia has been affected by what are now called by many “new threats.” Though perhaps not as new as some would claim, these threats have definitely been

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impacted by globalization. It has enhanced their scope. In response, the Colombian government, especially during the administration of President Uribe, has developed an effective strategy that has dealt effectively with these new threats and returned most of the country to normal life.

To achieve those results, the armed forces have been tasked with internal security missions that have included local security, counterterrorism, nation-building, and disaster relief. These have been happening now for many years. Particularly important has been the restoration of domestic order, which has been possible only by focusing the armed forces upon internal security as their primary mission. That the complexity of the situation seems to guarantee that irregular challenges will remain into the indefinite future, so will the role of the military be nontraditional, but only in terms of the artificial categories of Western military sociology.

In reality, service to the state is driven by the contextual dynamic. This demands that in the short- and medium-terms, the Colombian armed forces will not change in a dramatic way and will continue to perform the internal security missions with which they have been tasked. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Argentina fought a short war against the United Kingdom in 1982, and Peru and Ecuador engaged in frontier clashes in the 1970s and 1980s.

² Military actions took place deep in the Amazon Basin, and this factor limited the scope of operations. The major engagement took place in a remote location, Guepi, and it involved but three Colombian battalions supported by an artillery battery, two gunboats, and six planes deployed against a Peruvian reinforced company supported by two battalions that were unable to get to the battlefield in time after being stopped close to their rendezvous point.

³ Jamie Garcia Covarrubias, "New Threats and Defense Transformation: The Case of Latin America," *Low Intensity Conflict and Low Enforcement* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 2004), 114–155.

⁴ Since this time, the Colombian army normally has been weak in tanks and heavy artillery.

⁵ See Bradley Lynn Coleman, "The Colombian Army in Korea, 1950–1954," *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 4 (October 2005), 1137–1177.

⁶ Colombian Constitution, Title VII: The Executive Branch, Chapter 7, Public Force, Article 218.

⁷ Armero was a small city in the middle of Colombia that was wiped out by an avalanche in November 1986 with a toll of approximately 30,000 casualties.

⁸ Efforts were made to try to speed up the operation and to achieve results in a shorter period of time. In fact, President Uribe often urged his military commanders to quicker and better action.

⁹ The Colombian National Police has benefited from a long relationship with the appropriate U.S. authorities, which provided a great part of the equipment and training needed for mission expansion beyond the realm of traditional policing.

¹⁰ According to official figures, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) effectively have been reduced from between 18,000 to 20,000 in 2002 to 8,000 in 2010. Of the more than 100 armed columns previously in existence, only 30 are currently operational. Reduction of FARC combat power, therefore, has been significant, and changes of recovery in the short- to medium-term are low.

¹¹ Paramilitaries were armed militia of various origins that contested for local and resource control with the insurgents (now terrorists). Though they had a variety of origins, these groups were in their majority spawned

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by the actions of FARC. Necessarily, they involved themselves in criminality for funding and ultimately proved every bit as vicious as FARC in their behavior among the populace. Though often portrayed by activists as government auxiliaries, there were no formal links between the state and these criminal elements.

¹² Recently during a press conference in Bogota, Colombia's defense minister pointed out that *bandas criminales* are currently the most dangerous threat to local security in many places of the country and thus the most urgent security threat.

¹³ Information provided by the Colombian Defense Ministry (June 26, 2006) stated that 598 platoons of this type had been deployed with a total of 21,598 effectives in a four-phase program, Plan Coraza (Shield), which covered the most threatened populated areas of Colombia.